

HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

Museums by Arnold Myers

The biggest movement of heavy brass in the last year would seem to have been into the Fiske Museum, Claremont Colleges, California. The Fiske's energetic curator, Al Rice, is to be congratulated on his coup in acquiring the Coleman Collection of 152 brasswind instruments for the Museum. Among the Coleman instruments moved to the Fiske are the magnificent Lehnert "Centennial" model tuba, which was made to be played resting on the player's shoulders with the mouthpipe positioned directly onto the players mouth, and the rare English bass horn, a serpent derivative that has been known to tempt some English brass collectors to the sin of envy.

The Fiske is now well endowed with tuba-family instruments, having numerous helicons, over-the-shoulder instruments, examples of the rare quinticlavé (tenor ophicleide) as well as the nest of serpents obligatory for any serious instrument museum.

It remains to be seen how the Fiske Museum will integrate these acquisitions into its displays, which raises a general question faced by museum curators and designers: how much to show. At the time of writing, this question is being grappled with by at least one museum setting up new displays. At one extreme, if the showcases are packed with instruments in an attempt to show as much as possible from the museum's holdings, the interpretation of the display for the general visitor suffers, and an effect of bewilderment is induced in the average museum visitor. On the other hand, if the museum shows only the rarest and most precious of its specimens, each magnificently housed and presented with a well-illustrated account of its history and significance, the visitor is left without any coherent story of the development of instruments and the enthusiast is cheated of seeing the many

obscure instruments held by the museum, some of them probably unique.

This problem is particularly severe for the tuba family. Faced with a need to reclaim showcase space, a curator would need to remove 10 cornets from display to gain the space of one ophicleide or tuba. As a result, it has to be admitted that many museums who illustrate copiously the history of the flute or clarinet offer little in the way of tuba history. Of course each museum has to tailor the presentation of its material to its audience, and keep those who fund it sweet. I must say that my own preference as a museum visitor is to see lots and lots of instruments close together—so that one can experience the excitement of making discoveries, seeing similarities that possibly no one has noticed before.

Museums that have a problem with display space now have an alternative medium to show their treasures: the World-Wide Web. Their use of this is embryonic, but the potential is there for making available vast amounts of information—textual, pictorial and audible. Some museums, such as the Fiske and Edinburgh University, maintain complete lists of their holdings on their websites. Some, such as Stockholm and Edinburgh, have galleries of pictures of selected instruments. It is to be hoped that other tuba-rich museums will establish websites that go beyond advertisement to provision of real information.

The Musical Instrument Committee of the International Council of Museums (CIMCIM) has established a website with many useful pages. One is a page of links to members' museum websites, several of which have useful information where one can read, see and in some cases hear



Tuba in BB-flat (Henry Lehnert, Philadelphia, 1876-1880). "Centennial" model with three rotary valves (Fiske B302)

interesting instruments. Also on the CIMCIM website is the beginnings of the new electronic edition of the International Directory of Musical Instrument Collections and Museums. The old paper version was indispensable to the globe-trotting instrument buff; the new edition will be even more useful. Directory pages for eight countries have been put on the website so far. The URL is: <http://www.icom.org/cimcim/> [or <http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/cimcim>]

Book Review

by Clifford Bevan

John Fletcher—Tuba Extraordinary edited by Philip Jones. The John Fletcher Trust Fund, 14 Hamilton Terrace, London NW8 9UG, England. 1997. Including mailing: UK £12; Europe £13; elsewhere £15. Please pay in £ sterling.

This modest, generously illustrated book reflects with uncanny accuracy John Fletcher's unique and lovably eccentric warmth. It was the idea of tubist Jack Allison, who has carefully accumulated an archive of Fletcher material, and was edited by Philip Jones, who was closely involved with so much of Fletcher's music making during the 20 years in which he provided the virtuoso bass parts for the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble.

The book presents two complementary aspects of its very complex subject. One is the biographical, explaining how John Fletcher grew up in Yorkshire, becoming about the only person in the county never to play in a brass band; how he went to Cambridge to read not music but natural sciences; and how he excelled initially not only as a tubist but as a player of the French horn, having had previous tuition on the viola and bassoon. There are anecdotes galore, from colleagues including Derek Bourgeois, Denis Wick, Patrick Harrild, Elgar Howarth and his widow, Margaret. At Cambridge, Bourgeois was the better tuba player, but remembers the powerfully musical account that Fletcher gave on horn in a performance of Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*.

Others remember his tandem [bicycle] built for three, the portable model railway-making workshop he took on tour, the Chopin etudes played by ear on CC

Bass Horn of British origin, ca. 1820. Metal body and four keys (Fiske B303)



tuba, the whole jar of pickled eggs he once ate at one go. This was the man with an uncanny ability to defuse explosive orchestral situations with a convincing imitation of a toilet flush or, in the case of a confrontation between Philip Jones and the producer in a television studio, by dropping to the floor with his hands backwards on the ground, his body face-upwards, and racing across the studio floor like a huge spider.

The less picturesque but more valuable aspect of the book is a timely reprinting of Fletcher's own *Tuba Talk* articles that initially appeared in that sadly-missed journal, *Sounding Brass*. These are the informed deliberations of the professional; discussing tubas and tuba music with a profundity and clarity rarely found. Those very qualities, profundity and clarity, were what he sought in the ideal tuba. The frustrations he expressed with British instruments are still expressed by players 20 years later, while the stunningly candid and thoughtful interview he gave Tom Aitken in *Brass Bulletin* 47 in 1984 (not reprinted here), explains how and why, with many misgivings, he came to the CC [tuba]. As time progressed, he became increasingly disturbed by what he called "The American Tuba Explosion." In articles on "Is the Tuba Really a Solo Instrument?" we find his famous comment on the tuba solo repertoire, "that most of it sounds to me to have been written by tuba players for tuba players to play to tuba players." Disagree? Offended? Does it hurt? Or is there really a universal truth here? During the *Sounding Brass* article he raised the possibility that

much of the lowest part in the brass quintet repertoire might be better played on bass trombone.

John Fletcher thought these thoughts, made many of these observations, 20 years ago and more. His authority lay in his being, and remaining, the most outstanding tubist that Britain has ever produced and, on the strength of the testimonials from a number of outstanding American players in the book, eminent in the world rankings. His outlook was strengthened and focused through his not having devoted his student years exclusively to the tuba, through his experiences as a horn player, through his love of railways, Yorkshire and fish and chips.

It is time for us to read and reread these unique thoughts of a unique person, if only for the selfish reason of trying to stay sane in an increasingly mad world. If you're not the selfish type, then buy the book to support the fund that assists promising young brass players. My copy of this precious volume has a permanent place at my bedside—and don't even *think* about asking if you can borrow it!

4x24